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Abraham Lincoln.

S P E E C H

OF

HON. HENRY R. RATHBONE,  
O F ILLINOIS,

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

*Tuesday, February 12, 1924.*

Mr. RATHBONE. Mr. Speaker, we celebrate to-day the anniversary of the birth of the most beloved of all Americans, Abraham Lincoln. We recognize in him the highest combination of heart, conscience, and brain ever produced in our country, or in any other land.

How shall we estimate the greatness of rulers? Surely, not by the glitter and glamor which accompanied their lives, but by the enduring value to humanity of their achievements. Some flashed like meteors across the horizon of their day and were dreaded, flattered, or adored, whose names are now well-nigh forgotten, whose monuments have crumbled, whose influence on future generations is at an end.

The names of other leaders of men fade with time; not so with that of Abraham Lincoln. His is growing greater, more honored and beloved every year that passes by.

The place of Lincoln in history is unique. All nations have paid their tribute to his memory. In England Lord Charnwood has written his biography; Drinkwater has produced the famous play that has had such a spectacular success on both sides of the ocean, and British statesmen, especially such a leader as Lloyd-George, have time and again been quoting Abraham Lincoln to sustain them in their policies and have come to this country and made special pilgrimages to the scenes of Lincoln's life and death.

As America towers to-day above other countries, so Abraham Lincoln towers above all other statesmen of the world's history in the spotless purity of his purposes, in the unselfishness of his devotion to the loftiest ideals, in his tenderness of heart, his greatness of soul, in the national unity, which was his achievement, and in the blessing which he conferred on humanity. [Applause.]

Lincoln first convinced the minds of his fellow citizens, then won the hearts of the Nation, and now has captured the imagination of mankind.

The prophetic words of Edwin M. Stanton, uttered at Lincoln's deathbed, have come true—"Now he belongs to the ages." Yes, to the ages and to all mankind. Wherever the human heart shall sigh for freedom, wherever men shall seek to establish or to maintain a true, rational, constitutional liberty, wherever they shall strive to achieve a national unity, there they will turn to Abraham Lincoln as their great example, their guide, who will lead them on the pathway of duty to a glorious destiny.

The world honors Lincoln because he was the shining example in history of the ideal statesman. In his character he exemplified the golden mean. He possessed that proper balance of qualities which insures the highest success. He had firmness without obstinacy, mercy without weakness, shrewdness without trickery, secrecy without deceitfulness, courage without rashness, caution without timidity, patience without dilatoriness, friendship without favoritism, ambition without selfishness. [Applause.]

To my mind no human life so well repays study as that of Abraham Lincoln. Examples are more potent than precepts. We see our own souls mirrored in the life of another. As that life is noble, so are we enlightened and inspired by the contemplation of it.

The career of Lincoln puts new heart in the unsuccessful. It preserves our faith in the final triumph of right. It teaches that character is our greatest asset, that unselfishness is better than self-seeking, that forgiveness is better than revenge, and that duty is our safest guide.

In him we see ourselves as we should wish to be—our neglected opportunities improved, our rejected thoughts made fruitful, our nobler impulses which slumbered awakened into fullest life.

The name of Abraham Lincoln has a preeminence all its own in history, because of his supreme achievement in securing for this Nation an enduring unity. The men whose work was to build empires and unite scattered and hostile peoples into nations for their prosperity and greatness—these are universally hailed as the greatest names of history. Yet compare them one and all and their achievements with that of Abraham Lincoln. Cæsar, Alexander, Charlemagne, Napoleon set forth to conquer the then known world. How glorious! men exclaimed. But the empires they founded have perished, and the proud monuments they erected by the blood and tears of the conquered lie prostrate in the dust.

The thing of all others that the world most needs to-day is unity. The greatest boon conferred by America upon humanity was the solving of the problem which had perplexed philosophers for ages, namely, how to combine vast territory and population with civil liberty. The solution was found by our fathers in a Federal Republic, created and maintained through the Constitution of the United States. This made possible a stronger and greater Union than had ever before existed.

The principle on which such a government is founded we may call constitutionalism, as opposed to the spirit of imperialism, which disregards government "by the consent of the governed" and seeks to dominate others against their will.

The spirit of constitutionalism and imperialism always have been and always will be at eternal war with each other. One or the other will finally rule the world.

Imperialism believes in the power of might; constitutionalism maintains with Abraham Lincoln that "right makes might."

Imperialism declares that there is no such thing as international ethics; that the sovereign State is a law unto itself. Constitutionalism says that nothing can be right between nations which is wrong between men.

Imperialism glories in the subject peoples over whom it holds sway. Constitutionalism glories in the liberty which a nation confers upon others as well as upon its own people.

Imperialism seeks riches through the tribute it wrings from the downtrodden of other lands. Constitutionalism seeks the prosperity that comes from honest and legitimate commerce and toil.

Imperialism believes in the majesty of emperors, the exaltation of nobility, the glamor of titles, the exclusiveness of caste and class. Constitutionalism believes in "equal rights to all and special privileges to none."

Imperialism believes that it is natural and proper for one nation to rise to greatness by using the necks of others as a stepping-stone to power. Constitutionalism believes that each nation can prosper most through the prosperity of all, and that the greatest wealth of any people is the number of human beings by whom it is loved and blessed.

Imperialism is governed by the spirit of selfishness and must end in disaster. Constitutionalism is inspired by the spirit of cooperation. It is founded on the rock of principle, where it will stand forever.

Constitutionalism had its birth in America, and to-day finds its chief exemplar and champion in the United States. The people's Government can only be maintained by national unity. Without the bond of a strong nationality, constitutionalism would be at the mercy of imperialism.

That America should weather the storm and remain one great Nation was all essential, and so Abraham Lincoln was right in his estimate of the importance of the issue involved in our civil strife when, in his immortal address at Gettysburg, his prophetic vision clearly saw that the decision there rendered by the arbitrament of arms was not merely whether this country should remain one, but that "Government of the people, by the people, and for the people should not perish from the earth."

The supreme value of constitutional government has never been so marvelously shown as in the history of this country. From the moment that we adopted the Constitution of the United States our people started out on the greatest march of all history. They crossed the prairies of the West, cut down the forests, scaled the Rocky Mountains, and never stopped until they reached the Pacific Ocean, stretching out toward the setting sun. [Applause.] In less than 100 years they conquered this great continent of ours and gave it to civilization. At the time of the adoption of the Constitution we were a little people of scarcely 4,000,000, scattered along the Atlantic seaboard, tottering on the verge of bankruptcy, quarreling among ourselves, weak at home, and despised abroad. Now we have become a great Nation of 110,000,000 people—the greatest, richest, and happiest on the face of the globe.

What marvelous changes we have seen take place in a few brief years. The star of empire has crossed the ocean from the Old World to the New and at this moment it gleams above our country. Beyond any question to-day the United States is the leading Nation of the world.

These are not mere idle words. We can prove them to be true. Look at it first from the economic standpoint. There

are certain great basic products on which the wealth and prosperity of every nation in this modern age must rest. Our country is the leader in the production of all these products, with the single exception of wool. We are the leaders in the production of meat and wheat, of lumber and oil, of iron and steel, of cotton and corn, of copper and coal. We stand far in advance of every other country in these great necessary products for the welfare of mankind.

Look at it now from the financial standpoint. Before the World War we were a debtor nation; we owed great sums of money abroad. In a few brief years we have passed from being a debtor nation to become what we are to-day, the world's greatest creditor nation. At this moment about one-half of all the gold in the world is in the hands of the people of the United States.

But there is a spiritual side to the leadership of nations as well as a material side. I am willing to have my country judged by that test as well. We did not enter the Great War for selfish reasons, nor did we seek any gain as a result of it. We have not asked for one inch of territory nor one cent of indemnity from the conquered. [Applause.]

I have an ideal, as I believe that you have, too—the ideal of Abraham Lincoln—of what I want to see our country be. I want to see the United States the leader in everything that is good and great and for the welfare of the human race. I want to see this country the economic leader, the financial leader, the industrial leader, the commercial leader of all nations, but most of all I want to see America the moral leader of mankind and point all others to the dawn of a brighter and better day. [Applause.]

I glory in the thought that this has never been a land of imperialism or militarism; that the flag of our country has never visited any people but it has blessed that people. [Applause.] We know what the flag did for Panama. It picked it out of the dirt, cleaned it up, made it a fit, sanitary place to live in. We know what the flag did for Porto Rico and Hawaii. We know what it did for 2,000,000 of people in Cuba, when it struck the chains from their bodies and lifted them out of the darkness of despair into the sunlight of freedom and independence. We know what the flag did for 10,500,000 in the Philippines when it sailed that blessed Sabbath morn at Dewey's masthead into Manila Bay. We know that it kindled there a light of liberty which shall never be put out. [Applause.]

We have all faith in the mission of the flag and in the destiny of our country as the leader of the world. At home all is peace and prosperity. Our boundary line with Canada of 3,000 miles is not guarded by a soldier, a fort, or a gun. No one dreams of war among ourselves or with our neighbors.

But what a contrast the New World to-day presents to the Old. In Europe the dogs of war are still snarling and snapping and ready to fly at each other's throats. Europe amid its ruins nursing its revenge; Europe with its hatreds and jealousies of a thousand years; Europe piling mountain high the expenses for future wars; Europe with its frowning guns and scowling fortresses—what a contrast to our own happy, proud America.

Back of us still looms the great World War, with all its dreadful losses and its solemn warning. That war cost the human race 10,000,000 priceless lives lost on the battle field. How many untold millions more have laid down their lives as an indirect result of it through famine, slaughter, and disease, and all the dread horsemen of the Apocalypse that ride in the wake of war no one can tell. It cost in the accumulated savings of the peoples of the world the collosal sum of about \$300,000,000,000.

Yet Europe again talks of "the next war," of another conflict which would shake civilization to its foundations and surpass all other wars in its horror and destructiveness. Across the seas war is looked upon as natural, almost as inevitable.

How different is our attitude toward this, the greatest scourge that has ever afflicted the human race! We believe that wars of ruthless aggression and unprovoked spoliation should be branded with the moral condemnation of mankind.

Such wars are relics of barbarism. They are like a gigantic rock that baffles the efforts of humanity to rise to higher things. The greatest irony of our boasted civilization is that it is still led captive behind the chariot of Mars.

How shall humanity be rescued from its impending fate? Let the example of Lincoln furnish the answer.

Lincoln, who loved to pardon more than others to revenge, more just amid the storms of war than other rulers in the placid days of peace; Lincoln, who cemented the Union by forgiveness and made it eternal by mercy; Lincoln, the kindest of statesmen, the simplest of the great, the most humble of the exalted; Lincoln, who never forgot his duty and never remembered a wrong, who proved by his life that Christianity and politics are not inconsistent and that a statesman may be great, not in spite of but because he possessed the spirit of the lowly Nazarene; Lincoln, who could look beyond the hurricane of hate and strife and with prophetic vision see a reunited Nation, consecrated to brotherhood and peace; Lincoln, who never dreamed of punishment, whose heart had no room for malice, whose joy was to spare and not to crush, to whom power was nothing except as an opportunity for doing good. Oh, that the soul of Lincoln could rule the world to-day!

Better than all treaties and covenants would his spirit be to heal the wounds of war, banish hatred, make men clasp hands in friendship and recreate the new and better world on the ruins of the old.

Our great civil strife ended with reconciliation. To-day the grand old Potomac, once the dividing line of warring sections, now sweeps on majestically to the sea through a land that knows neither North nor South but only the Union. [Applause]. How much of this spirit of unity, which makes our country stand forth in such striking contrast with the nations of Europe to-day, is due to Abraham Lincoln can scarcely be estimated.

Never was the true spirit of conciliation, mercy, forgiveness, and brotherhood more clearly shown in any man or ruler than by Lincoln on his last day. At breakfast that morning his son Robert, who had just returned from the front after having witnessed the surrender of General Lee at Appomattox, produced

a picture of General Lee. The President took it in his hand and gazed at it for a few moments musingly. Then he said:

That is the face of a noble man. [Applause.] How glad I am that this war is now over and that we shall be living in peace and harmony once more with the brave men that we have been fighting for years.

In the great heart of the President there was no room for any such feeling as hatred, malice, or uncharitableness toward any living soul.

At the Cabinet meeting which took place about 11 o'clock that morning the President took occasion to commend General Grant, who was present by special invitation, for the terms of the surrender, which Grant had made only five days before on his own initiative with General Lee. Grant had shown himself the most generous victor in all history. He had simply said to Lee and his men:

Go back to your homes and families, under no conditions but the mere promise that you will not bear arms again against this Government.

This action of Grant at Appomattox is worthy to be placed side by side with the beautiful words of Lincoln himself, expressed in his great inaugural address, that breathe the very spirit of brotherhood, of mercy, of reconciliation:

We are not enemies but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from many a battle field and patriot grave to every loving heart and hearthstone all over this wide land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

As you doubtless know, my parents were the young engaged couple, Major Rathbone and Miss Harris, the daughter of United States Senator Ira Harris, of New York, who drove that fateful night of April 14, 1865, with President and Mrs. Lincoln in the carriage to Ford's Theater and sat with him in the box, when the bullet of the assassin cut short the life of the President. I am able to say with the utmost assurance of truth and judging from the words uttered by Lincoln in the presence of these persons in his last hour, that his great heart held nothing but kindness and good will toward all his countrymen, that no one could have rejoiced more at the return of peace, and that in his last moments he was looking forward with the highest hope to an era of happiness and prosperity for all his beloved people, North and South alike.

As a result of this spirit, more than perhaps for any other reason, we are to-day one great, harmonious, united people, with "one heart, one hand, one flag, one land, one Nation evermore." To-day from the surf-beaten cliffs of Maine to the arms of the Golden Gate, from the mighty stream of the Columbia to the pine-shadowed Everglades of Florida, there waves but one flag and that is the starry banner of the United States. [Applause.]

America has proven that the boasts of imperialism were vain, and that a nation can be the most powerful in the world and at the same time the most peaceful in the world.

We rejoice in the thought that we belong to a Nation which combines qualities heretofore considered incompatible, that our country is the strongest and at the same time the kindest, the freest and the most stable, the most peaceful and the most respected, the most unselfish and the most prosperous, the most generous and the most wealthy, the most cosmopolitan in its population and the most united in its loyalty to its flag, the highest in its ideals and the most envied for its success. Earnestly do we hope that such our America may ever be.

Just as Abraham Lincoln has, more than any other statesman, set the moral standard for men, so we hope and believe America, more than any other land, will fix the moral standard for all nations.

I want to see our country rise to the full measure of its greatness and prove not unworthy of its destiny. Let us make an effort to heal the wounds of war and to bring something of the spirit of harmony and cooperation to distracted Europe which reigns in our country to-day.

We have already shown what we can do when we make the effort. The epoch-making conference at Washington which not long ago passed into history accomplished something which had never before been achieved since the beginning of time. It called a halt to the mad race of armaments and squandering of the people's money in preparedness for naval war. From beginning to end the leadership of our country was shown. It was shown when the call came for the conference from the President of the United States and when it was most eagerly accepted by all the Governments invited to participate. It was shown when the conference met not on foreign soil but on American soil in our Nation's Capital. It was shown when the delegates assembled in their unanimous choice for chairman of the convention of our Secretary of State, Charles Evans Hughes. It was shown when the agenda, all the plans and proposals for a limitation of armament and the peace of the world proved to be not of foreign but of American origin. And perhaps most of all, to my mind, the leadership of our country was shown when in his opening address the chairman brushed aside all the outworn methods of secret diplomacy of the Old World that had so often lured nations into war, and in a straightforward businesslike way laid before the delegates a concrete, definite plan for the attainment of the object desired which was so plainly just and right and for the welfare of humanity that no one dared to oppose it, even if he had wished to do so, and one by one the delegates arose and agreed in principle to what the United States had proposed. There was a victory of peace no less splendid than any victory of war the world has ever seen.

One step has been taken, can it not be followed up by other steps? Can there not be further bounds set to the insanity of nations in piling ever higher and higher the expenses for armaments? Can there not be something done by our country as a leader to turn the nations of the world from the hatreds of the past and the selfishness of the present to a future of hope and not of despair? If this greatest blessing of all to mankind is to be achieved, I believe that it can only be accomplished through the influence of America and the spirit of Abraham Lincoln.

Let us take for our motto the words of him whose memory we honor to-day, true when spoken, and just as true at the present hour, and let them speak for us our sentiments toward all the other nations of the world and the attitude of our country on the great question of peace on earth and cooperation among men:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the Nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and his widow and orphan; to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

[Applause.]

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